

Turbans a safety risk? Nonsense.

BY SUE MONTGOMERY, GAZETTE JUSTICE REPORTER JUNE 6, 2013



Gurtaj Singh, 7 takes part in a pick-up game next to the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar temple in the Lasalle area of Montreal Wednesday, June 5, 2013. The Quebec Soccer Federation has banned playing with turbans and other Sikh head coverings.

Photograph by: John Kenney, The Gazette

MONTREAL — In the last decade, the trauma department at the Montreal Children’s Hospital has seen more than 10,000 injuries from organized soccer activities — and not one of them was caused by a turban.

Even scouring the data from the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program, a national database, doesn’t turn up a single soccer-related injury involving a turban.

But Debbie Friedman, the director of trauma at the Children’s, says there have been plenty of injuries — and even some deaths — caused by improperly anchored goalie nets, coaches not spotting a concussed player, lack of shin pads or improper footwear.

“So where exactly they’re getting their information about turbans being a security risk, I’d like to know, because I’d like to educate myself,” Friedman said Wednesday in response to the Quebec Soccer Federation’s weekend decision to ban turbans on soccer pitches, essentially barring as many as 200 observant Sikh children from the game.

“Participating in sports programs contributes to the physical, social, and psychological well-being of

children and teens,” said Freidman, who is also director of the CHIRPP for the MUHC.

“It also provides important opportunities for teamwork, leadership and skill development, so it would be a shame if this opportunity was denied as a result of banning turbans under the unsubstantiated reason of being a safety risk.”

The ruling, made by the federation’s board of directors, continued to cause a firestorm across Canada and abroad Wednesday as petitions were circulated and a Facebook protest page set up.

The federation’s sponsors, big corporations including Couche Tard and Saputo, didn’t return calls to comment on their name being attached to such a controversial move.

Jindi Singh, a Victoria, B.C., resident who set up the Facebook protest page and has three young children who are enrolled in soccer for September, called the ruling “ridiculous.”

“It’s a bit of an own goal for the federation,” said Singh, who grew up playing soccer in England. “I just hope there’s no overtly political reason for why they’ve done this,” he said. “Every Sikh I know in Quebec is very proud of being Québécois and now you’re telling a whole generation of children that they’re not Québécois enough.”

One of those is Chattar Singh, secretary-general of the Sikh Temple in LaSalle.

In an interview Wednesday, the grandfather of two girls said his own grandfather died fighting for Canada on the beaches of Normandy, and that as taxpayers in Quebec, Sikhs shouldn’t be banned from public soccer pitches because they wear turbans.

“We are really worried,” he said. “We want to integrate but (Quebec) wants us to assimilate.”

He pointed out that like French-speakers, Sikhs make up a fraction of the world’s population.

“We are even a minority compared to them,” he said. “I think we minorities need to band together.”

Jindi Singh said he’s noticed that the federation, which has been dodging the growing tide of criticism and not returning reporters’ phone calls, has been removing comments about the ban on its own Facebook page.

He’s also been in touch with the corporate sponsors, asking them to reconsider their support of the federation if the ban isn’t rescinded.

“A lot of these businesses support the federation simply because the role of the federation is to promote soccer within the community — and this (decision) flies in the face of that,” he said.

Dominique Peschard, president of La Ligue des droits et libertés, said it’s up to the federation to back up its stance that turbans pose a risk.

“If they can’t put forward compelling material evidence, and the information points in the other direction that there is actually no security risk, our opinion is there should be no ban on the wearing

of a turban.”

But if, as some have suggested, the ban can be seen as a trend to ban religious symbols entirely, Peschard said that’s a concern.

“There’s a feeling of insecurity that is fed on by political parties here and elsewhere,” he said. “It’s symptomatic.”

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